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CHAPTER IV

THE SETTING OF HAITIAN
LIFE

SINCE the discovery by the Spaniards that the wealth of Haiti lay rather in cultivating sugar than in the exploitation of gold mines, its dominant economy has been agricultural. In the valley of Mirebalais, as elsewhere in the island, the small cultivator holds the center of the economic stage. In the main he works his own land, inherited from his father or acquired through purchase. He may also cultivate additional plots of ground which he rents, since much of the land expropriated when independence was gained was retained by the State and today is leased for nominal fees.

The life of the Haitian farmer, though hard, is simple and self-contained. With but few exceptions, he supplies all his necessities, for he commands almost the entire range of techniques known to his culture; hence Haitian economy shows a lack of specialization that in the main is only relieved by the sex division of labor. The day's work begins at dawn, the women rising before the men to prepare coffee, the invariable drink of early morning. When finished with his breakfast, the farmer goes to his field, where, except for the hottest hours, he works until sundown, his one meal being brought to him at about nine or ten o'clock in the morning. His wife meanwhile occupies herself with her household tasks, pounding grain in her mortar or working in her garden near by.

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is under way. The size of the *combite* is judged by the number of drums and *lambi*, or conch-shell horns used, for where two or three of either are required, an especially large group of workers is usually assembled. It may be observed in passing that it is undoubtedly the sound of this *combite* drum, heard in the mountains or through the brush by travelers, that has so often been mistaken for the "mysterious booming" of the *vodun* drums.*

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The preparation of the food is the work of the women of the household giving the *combite*, aided by their female relations and the wives of friends and neighbors. This is no small task, for goats and even a bullock may be killed to feed a large *combite*, while in addition other dishes to go with the meat must be cooked. Each woman is given charge of a great pot and does her best to see to it that an appetizing dish is ready for the men when their work is done. While the food is being cooked, the real object of the *combite*, the clearing of the field, is being pursued. A *chef d'esquade*, usually with a small group, begins the afternoon's labor, and, being a fast worker, he himself sets the pace. As more men arrive, he walks about, encouraging the constantly increasing number of men in their efforts, seeing to it that the tempo originally set is continued, and when necessary picking up a hoe to restore a lagging rhythm. Occasionally the *chef d'esquade* will stand in front of the men to make sure that all keep together, and if the lazy cannot be roused to work by direct order or through ridicule, he will drive them away.

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The work progresses with incredible speed as the line moves down the field. In one case a *combite* of between fifty and seventy-five men completely cleared a field of several acres in a single afternoon, and this without undue effort or what appeared to be the expenditure of much energy. The flashing of the hoes in the brilliant sunlight accentuates the color of the scene; each implement is raised high above the head of the one who wields it, to be brought down at the proper in-

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*ABOVE, Preparing the food for a combite feast.
BELOW, Drums marking the beat for the hoes.*

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[facing p. 72]

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to cutting fruit, though seen in Africa, was probably introduced there by the early traders, and all machetes found today in Haiti are imported from Europe or America. The same is true of the hoe, for the short-handled, broad-bladed West African hoe has given way to the European long-handled type, though the blade of the Haitian hoe is somewhat broader than that used in America and Europe. Despite the presence of domesticated animals to draw the plow, this implement has never gained favor in Haiti, nor have recent efforts to teach the Haitian peasant the use of the plow achieved any degree of success. He prefers his African mode of cultivation, to say which implies more than just the employment of a certain implement, since even such matters as the manner in which he employs his hands and feet in the process of planting are included. When the Dahomean plants, for example, he holds a calabash of seed under his left arm, from which he takes the grains with his right hand. As he moves down the rows of newly turned earth, he makes a depression with the heel of his right foot, drops a few grains into this depression and, replacing the earth with his toes, takes a step so that he can repeat the process with his left foot. This is exactly the manner in which Haitians were observed planting in the valley of Mirebalais.* Unlike the usage in Africa, however — where the men clear the ground, the men and women plant, and the women tend the growing crops — the European pattern, which places agriculture in all its essential phases in the hands of men, has been taken over almost in its entirety.

The women have retained almost without change the African modes of preparing food. Grain is first pounded in an African-like mortar, with an aboriginal type of pestle, while the shelled kernels are winnowed in a large round basketry tray. The cooking is either done on a raised mud platform in the cooking shelter, as in West Africa, or on three stones, employed as rests for the pots, a method equally characteristic of Africa. In the Haitian cuisine the prevalence of stews, of

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~~In the Haitian cuisine the prevalence of~~
dishes fried in deep fat, of the generous use of pepper in seasoning, are all African, as are even the names of certain dishes, such as *acansan*, a Nigerian-Dahomean term which designates the cooked balls of cornmeal. One of the few European intrusions is white bread, while the cassava cakes, also important in native diet, derive from the aboriginal Indian inhabitants.

In its outward forms the economic system under which the Haitian peasant lives seems entirely based upon European pecuniary patterns. Money follows the French system, even to the official use of the French designation, *centimes*, for the smallest parts of the principal unit of currency, the *gourde*. Both paper money and coins are used, and as the result of the Marine occupation American money is as well known as the currency of the country itself. Buying and selling goes on in the accepted European manner, the price of such export crops as cotton, sugar-cane, and coffee responding to the fluctuations of the world market. In many of its inner aspects also, the values of the Haitian are influenced by the money economy taken over from Europe and America.

The conclusion that the economy of Africa has been swept aside by that of Europe needs, nevertheless, to be qualified if certain historical and psychological factors are not to be ignored. It must not be forgotten that in West Africa, long before the period of European contact, a monetary system based on the cowrie shell had been fully developed. The prestige of wealth, the resulting drive to obtain property, the pursuits of buying and selling, and other aspects of a pecuniary civilization were as current in West Africa at the time of slaving, and continue today, as in Europe or in Haiti. When some of the attitudes associated with the economic life are analyzed, it is no simple matter, therefore, to state whether they stem from African or European sources, or both.

One pattern common to both economies, the validation of position through the conspicuous display of resources, has

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- In the Artibonite Valley, where much rice is grown, a similar ceremony takes place before the rice is gathered from the fields. In this ceremony it is rice that is shared with the family ancestors, who have first rights, and with close friends who have aided with the planting. This feast is called *mangé diri*, or sometimes *gouté diri*, the tasting of the rice. Small amounts of rice are taken from the fields, cooked with red beans or Congo beans, or perhaps made into dumplings. The farmer's friends and relatives gather while the food is still cooking, and play games such as *wari* and *trois-sept*. The children play *gag* games and sing songs, and sometimes a *malt' conte*—a storyteller—comes to entertain them.

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When the food is finally ready, the family ancestors are given their share. The farmer takes a calabash bowl of the rice and walks around the house grounds calling upon his immediate ancestors to accept their share. He drops a little food on the ground for the remembered dead, for the unknown dead who preceded them, for the Haitian dead, and for the dead of Africa. He also drops small portions for the dead twins, the dead albinos, the deformed dead, and the dead who have lost limbs, and for the distressed dead who have been improperly buried, or who may not have received the feasts that were due them. Afterward, he offers food to those who died of drowning, or who were lost at sea and never heard of again.

Each course is shared with the ancestors. The farmer takes a pitcher of water, spilling a little here and a little there until the dead have quenched their thirst. He also gives a little of everything to the family loa. Then the calabashes are set out on a bench or table reserved for the dead, and this food is not disturbed. Food for the *marassas* is set out separately on the ground in three small *conis*, or gourd dishes.

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The family ancestors whose good will has made the harvest possible having been taken care of, the food is now shared among the extended family and the friends who helped in the fields. Later there are prayers to the loa, the saints, and God, led by the houngan or a *prêt' savane*. To finish the affair, there may be Juba-type dances for the older people, while the children watch or play *gag* games. Only after this service are the farmer and his family and his *counbite* (mutual labor group), if he belongs to one, free to go out and harvest the rice.

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These feasts of the rice and yam harvests are not of New World origin. Similar harvest festivals for yams or rice are held over a wide area of West Africa. There, as in Haiti, the fundamental concern is with the family ancestors, whose good will must be constantly nourished so that the rains continue to fall, the crops flourish, and human beings remain fertile. Among the Ashanti of Ghana, for example, the yam and rice harvests are

4 [Account given by Jean Ravel Pinto. Cf. P.351, Category 116. -- Analyst]

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15. Pulverizing grain into meal. The mortar and pestle are standard kitchen fixtures.

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14. Fishermen of Vallée des Matelots, on the Bay of Gonaïves.



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16. Man with a machete making a wari board. The machete is used for cutting trees, trimming brush, weeding gardens, fashioning wooden objects such as drums and mortars, and many other purposes.

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17. Winnowing grain with a woven tray.

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rhythmically, to the accompaniment of drums, *catus*, or horns, while a singing leader composes topical songs in which the laborers join.

The tools which a rural Haitian chooses, and the way he uses them, often are in a West African tradition. He performs a multitude of tasks with his machete, or bush knife: weeding a garden, peeling an orange, cutting down a tree, making a drum or mortar, opening a coconut. It is an all-purpose tool, as it is in Africa. Until a few years ago it was supplemented by the extra-long, heavier, "double machete." The axe and the chisel are known and used too, but the machete is supreme.

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[412] The hoe is the tool for tilling the soil, even in the flat country, and even though the Haitian has horses and cattle which could pull a plow.

[538] Horses are for riding and not for pulling. In carrying loads, the Haitian peasant still prefers the head to the shoulders. If he has a donkey, the donkey will carry for him. An old Haitian proverb goes: "Meçi Bondieu pou' bourrique là, si nous pas gainyain bourrique là faut Haitien po'té tout bagaille" (Thank God for the donkey, if we didn't have the donkey the Haitian would have to carry everything). Generally speaking, the rough and rocky terrain of Haiti and inadequate secondary roads have done nothing to encourage the use of carts or wagons.

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[251] Corn is stored in the trees, as in West Africa, or in granaries built upon stilts, also as in West Africa. The Haitian makes his fire in the African fashion, with several long sticks or poles meeting point-to-point in the heart of the fire. As the ends are consumed, the sticks are pushed toward the center. Grain is pulverized in large wooden mortars, as in West Africa, and winnowed in a woven tray. Fish traps are sometimes woven in the traditional West African manner, and fishermen often set their nets in converging spirals and beat the water with sticks to drive the fish to the center. And on the rivers and lakes are to be seen dugout canoes of a kind familiar on the inland waters of West Africa.

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[834] The folklore of the fields contains many themes known to the West African. One old Haitian farmer, discussing the spiritual relationship of the planter to the earth, declared that a man must be strong and potent when he plants, else the crops will be vitiated and sickly. For this reason, he said, a man must not plant seeds the day after he has had sexual intercourse, because he has been temporarily drained of his life-giving powers.⁹

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538 The tale of the hoe that worked by itself in the fields is also widespread. It enters many animal and Bouki stories, and also is known in a form that is familiar in West Africa. In this story, there was once a man who owned a hoe which worked by itself whenever a magical formula was pronounced. It would stop working whenever the magical
9 [Footnote, see Category 116, p. 352.--Analyst]